



# Dialogue I

## Creative mission: today's challenges

*Wes White and Ian Galloway*

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*This is an edited transcript of their discussion which was the opening session of the "Exploring Mission in Scotland Today" day conference. A further discussion between them which rounded off the conference appears at the end of this issue.*

**WES WHITE:** In this first session we begin a conversation about what might be needed to face the challenges of mission in Scotland today, concentrating on various areas that might need our attention. I'm going to begin by asking Ian about a phrase he used over coffee earlier on – he spoke of the need for *generous hospitality* in our ministries within the cities of Scotland and, indeed, in any type of ministry at all. *Generous hospitality.*

Ian, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what you mean by that and how it works? What does it look like? Could you say something about *generous hospitality* as an idea?

**IAN GALLOWAY:** Let me try to answer that by speaking for a moment about what we have felt helpful on our journey in the Gorbals, which remains one of the poorest communities in Glasgow. There the mission of the church is set in a local community of 12,000 people. One of the striking things is the pace of change in people's lives – it is very rapid. Being able to accept change, then, and to work with changing circumstances is absolutely essential. We have to recognise, for example, that if people's lives aren't settled – if their life circumstances change for better or for worse – they will move elsewhere. So, the local population varies all the time in relation to the tenure and condition of local housing stock. That's one type of change.

Another is the change in the place of the church in urban society. We are now generations away from those heady days in the 1950s when people flooded into church. Pastorally and strategically I have been hugely influenced in my thinking by a simple story. Betty, who was a small child in the Gorbals in the 50s once told me that as a little girl she watched crowds of people going into church. She stood outside, looking on as a spectator. Why? Because coming from a poor family she knew that church was 'not for the likes of her'.

In our present engagement with the local community we have prioritised the poorest, the most vulnerable and marginalised people. Our aim has been to work out *how* to be in relationship with as many people as possible and then to *make* that happen. So our task and our mission are constantly pushing us outwards and away from concern for self or primarily about church in order to prioritise others. To take an example, in partnership with the local Catholic church, for the past seventeen years we have led the community response – at the community's invitation – in local work with asylum seekers. And that work has extended over the years to include some of the most vulnerable local people.

Over time this has led to the development of an event which takes place – not on a Sunday and not in our church but in another building – it is a lunch, an inclusive gathering usually of over a hundred people. It has now developed into a real community itself and displays the kind of behaviour reminiscent of the early Church: '*See how these people love one another*'.<sup>1</sup> Of those who attend, some are Christians

(of different varieties), some are Muslim, some are of no faith at all, a very few are atheists.

Harvey Cox, the Harvard-based theologian, came to visit and stayed with us for a few days. When he was describing this gathering he said (and I am going to quote him!):

It conjured glowing images of what the kingdom of God should look like. This was not just a crowd – it was an emerging *koinonia* – a visible, vibrant demonstration for all to see and taste and feel, recalling Karl Barth’s description of the role of the Church as ‘*a living demonstration of God’s intention for all humanity*’.

After reading that I felt I could retire! These words, however, are not without a certain challenge. What Cox describes does not fit into any of our confessional or denominational boxes.

In addition, we also support other weekly gatherings for more than a hundred people that take a spiritual approach to managing addiction and, for the past five years, we have hosted a cultural Tamil church that serves the Glasgow region.

Five years ago we opened a new church building. It was a great moment! To be quite clear, it has a huge great wooden cross on the outside which even lights up at night. But the signage, the signage on the building, is in this order: Café – Venue – Church. Café at the top, *then* Venue, *then* Church. We understand theologically, therefore, that the place of the church is foundational in holding up and supporting all of God’s people. Anyone is invited. Anyone is welcome to cross the threshold – not only those who can make a commitment or confession. We are known as a place where vulnerable people are welcome – and that includes some who are barred from almost everywhere else in the community.

Let me say, however, in finishing: this intentional engagement in mission hasn’t meant a larger worshipping Presbyterian community on a Sunday morning. The church has remained at around the same size over the past 20 years, although it is younger than it once was, and more diverse. Beyond that, however, the congregation is a very engaged group. There are a whole lot of other people who would, in

some sense, think our church is different – though you would have to ask them what that was.

**WW:** So, the term *generous hospitality* implies an inclusiveness for those who are vulnerable and left out and finding particular ways to demonstrate that.

For us in the Upper Room, one of the scholars who has been really helpful to us is Miroslav Volf in his very well-known book *Exclusion and Embrace*.<sup>2</sup> We actually do a little exercise in which we invite people to consider these four steps. First a *welcome*: we do this with wide open arms; the next step is *waiting* – people have plenty of time to decide how to respond to that but, of course, you can only wait with your arms extended this way for a few minutes and then you welcome them into an *embrace* – this is much more reassuring and comfortable for you as well as for them! The final movement is one of *release*, followed by sending others out into the world.

Welcome, wait, embrace and send. Now, in terms of *generosity*, such an embrace is quite easy with people who are like you, but it's much more difficult with those from a different culture. In our particular case in the Upper Room, those of a different culture are Iranian refugees. Here, *generous hospitality* takes place in a very hospitable environment. Those who are refugees come to the flat where my wife and I live – between 60 and 70 people each week. We gather together round a meal and try to learn how to show *generous hospitality* in a loving environment. We tend to feel good about embracing people that we choose, of our own liking, but when we try to extend that embrace the way Jesus would to the least, to the vulnerable and the voiceless, it is then that we become, I think, more missionally orientated – minded to include the poor of the world.

**IG:** One of the things that you said earlier on, was that you think that the Church's mission needs to be more gospel-focused and to achieve that we have to have a bit of robustness in our biblical theology. Could you explain a little more of what you meant by that?

**WW:** I'm very much convinced that teaching theology is not simply a way to pay the bills! I believe that a rigorous theology that is always

asking new questions is at the heart of what empowers mission. A thorough investigation of biblical ideas and contemporary culture is required for the ongoing empowerment of mission. Mission, in other words, is only as strong as a rigorous theology that allows it to flourish.

Recently, various areas have come to the fore for me. I have, for example, come to an astounding exegetical discovery (!) – which is this: that Genesis 1 comes before Genesis 3! That Genesis 1 precedes Genesis 3 means this – that the *imago Dei*, the image of God in all of humanity, male and female created in his image, is where we begin. There is, of course, the reality of sin and the disruption of all that is good that comes about in Genesis 3, but we begin with the image of God, and his presence in people. And that really empowers my thinking in terms of mission. I have to posit the question: Can I look for the image of Christ in every person and speak to bring that out? Can I point others towards the Creator who formed and fashioned them that way and *then* deal honestly with Genesis 3 which declares the disruption of all that, dealing honestly with the fragility that comes through human choices that are against God's ways and deal with that? That, in turn, leads into Genesis 3 and the Messianic declaration that out of the seed of the woman will come One who will bruise the head of the serpent, even though his own heel will be bruised.

This, again, points ahead to a Messianic *missio Dei*. I love the *missio Dei*. Mission thinking is so importantly strengthened by strong theological convictions around the Trinity, God as three in one. The well-known work by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*,<sup>3</sup> puts this so well. Mission is understood as being derived from the very nature of God, in which the classic doctrine of the *missio Dei* – of the Father sending the Son, and God the Son sending the Spirit – is expanded to include yet another movement: the Father, Son and Spirit sending the Church into the world. The Trinitarian concept that empowers the *missio Dei* derives from Genesis 1 and the image of God in humanity.

To turn now to *grace*. Personally, I would hope to live up to my first name. My name is, of course, Wesley White. I was named after John Wesley, and can also claim his brother Charles – a hymnwriter of great theological depth – as a namesake. John Wesley insisted on a renewal of a commitment to what he called *prevenient grace*. The Reformers, of course, referred to it as *general grace*, but the

Wesleyans, as you know, put great emphasis on the fact that in the empowering of mission the grace of God is *out there*, and at work. How we respond *to that* is very important.

Lastly, let me say something about an authentic biblical theological robustness. One key understanding of mission, Christologically-driven, is that mission comes out of following Christ. Ecclesiology, in other words, is not primary – rather, it is Christ, in his pull and direction into mission. I love John 8 and the story of the woman caught in adultery. Although there is a debate as to whether it was there originally, that only makes it all the more intriguing to me in wrestling to try and understand it. Here, Jesus shows us something of what a Christological mission might be – first *acceptance* and then *repentance*. The Lord says, ‘neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more’ (John 8:11). First, his acceptance and then, coming out of that, change – change coming out of acceptance. I think, Ian, that’s what you are seeking to express in what you are doing. You are seeking people of any confession whether they are of the Christian tradition or not.

These, then, are some of the areas that I have found rich and important. Let me ask you another question. In a discussion over coffee about how can we serve in the kingdom work of God together, you spoke of a certain need for the humility that allows partnership for mission purposes as the kingdom of Jesus grows. I wonder if you could say something about that. What do you mean by ‘humility’? And how can we bring the grace of humility into real practical situations. What might it look like in terms of mission partnership?

**IG:** To be concise, it is the conviction that we do not own the mission but that we are looking, where we are, to where God is working – and join with the work he is already doing.

**WW:** The grace of God already at work!

**IG:** Yes, and to recognise that it may include people who aren’t really very like us, for example. So again if I could just root this in the Gorbals, which is really all I know about – when I got there I quickly

became aware of the past of the place. Part of that past was that it had been a place of migration for over a century. There had been a huge Catholic migration into the area and as a result it is a place that has a much larger Catholic population than on average in Scotland. Along with that, this is a place that has a lot of residual sectarian tension between people. The church, it has to be said, has some degree of responsibility for that.

I went along, then, to see the local priest and I suggested that we should work together – fortunately he agreed! So we've been co-operating ever since. As the work developed we put the office for joint work in the Catholic church so that if the priest changed it would be hard to dislodge the joint work as a priority. We got the local schools together and encouraged them to begin to build closer relations with one another. At the moment we have an eighty-strong children's choir which is drawn from both of the schools. We work with hundreds of young people across the various learning communities now. In the high school, and the primary schools we explore with kids how they belong to one another, despite the sectarianism and racism and those things that fragment communities and set people against one another.

This is also a part of Glasgow that has a relatively large Muslim population. When, for example, a Muslim shopkeeper was murdered we were able to ensure that the schools in the neighbourhood got the right kind of help from both the Christian community and the Muslim community. As we have developed over time, we pay a lot of staff to do a lot of work. In fact, I could talk all day about what happens in people's lives through that work – through transformational change in people's lives!

However, the point I want to make is this: that there are many things that we can do together that we cannot do separately. And it's not always easy. For example, it is not easy to sit in the mosque with imams while a female colleague is not permitted to enter the room. But true partnership means that you engage, recognising that you will not always have things your own way. So we do that, it is an essential part of the work of setting people free from the oppression of their circumstances, enabling people to have a sense of purpose and to be included in the wider community. In helping to pave the way to fuller

lives for people, I understand mission as right up there along with everything else we do. Even if relatively few of those people come back to thank God for that, I still feel I am in quite good company given what I read of Jesus' ministry.

Many people, actually, do have a deep sense of gratitude and often their first response is to seek to do something for others in response to the change in themselves. The church, I think, once had a sense of entitlement. Ministers often used to show up at top tables and by right and expectation accept a place of status, but those days are gone. Partnership with others, however, can earn the church proper and significant influence through authentic relationship rather than an assumed authority. In my experience that comes much more through *what we do* rather than *what we say*.

To give one last example, it would have been unthinkable twenty years ago for the church and the Local Housing Association to partner with one another – the Housing Association was a bastion of working class socialism. Twenty years later, however, following lots of hard work in building up close contact, the relationship with the atheist director of the Housing Association is much more than close – so that now, for example, the Housing Association manages our building maintenance without a fee. They do it generously and in partnership. I sit as a member on their action committee which is concerned, not so much with the bricks and mortar of housing, but with community engagement and the enhancement of people's lives. As a church, we have a place at their decision-making table. As a result, when there was a recent move to establish a food bank locally we were able to suggest an alternative way to do this that prioritised people's dignity and choice. This was easier to do since we regularly feed hundreds of people for free. We run a bread-making course, we have a café that is affordable to local people, and so on. There is real partnership and real agreement around things that are deeply human and make a real difference in human lives. In doing this, we are there humbly – not, of course, like a doormat – but being there humbly we are committed to work with other people across our differences and see where we get to.



**WW:** Perhaps I can draw this first dialogue to a close. I think this ties into an area we will need to address if we are going to be thinking mission-based and missionally for Scotland, and, indeed, across Europe. The area I have in mind is what I would call *risk-taking leadership*. Leaders in our communities need to be so emboldened as to take risks. I once used to think of that in novel, entrepreneurial terms as being the kind of person who is willing to go out there and try something new. I rediscovered in Scripture, however, that at the heart of risk-taking leadership lies humility. You have to be willing to try and to fail; to be able to say – that didn't work. We can humbly try to build partnerships that cross the sacred-secular divide, but that often is risky and can fail.

The other issue here is that of raising up new leadership, leadership which may or may not do well. In my own setting – The Upper Room – we've struggled over the last year-and-a-half to raise up leaders who come from a refugee background. These are prospective leaders who need encouragement and deeper biblical instruction before they begin work and, of course, there is a risk involved. It has failed a number of times. This risk-taking, however, requires humility in the face of possible failure. When I look through Scripture, so many of the leaders actually encountered huge failure in ministry – even martyrdom, which, from one perspective, is the ultimate failure. From another perspective, of course, it's the beginning of resurrection and a new life.

One of the risk areas concerns the development of what I would call an *eschatologically-based imagination*. This is about a hopeful future in a move in which, quite literally, the arts create space for imagining. Too often we think of the arts as only for the elite, but in my work in Nairobi with our MA programme some of the best work in the Cabrera slum was developed by encouraging local people in the arts – in music-making, poetry, drama and dance. These African-style cultural and artistic ventures are another way of exploring what we dream about, and then giving that an eschatological framework that says God has something new for the future. There are risks when the church engages in actually 'fomenting the arts'. In our church-planting organisation, one of the measures of a healthy church plant is

that it is not just attracting artists but giving artists voice, giving them a platform for their prophetic message through poetry, word or dance for the future. In New Testament terms, there is a future, which I am convinced is what we mean by hope. Romans 8 is full of this call to us to place our hope in God's purposes for a new creation.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus adversus gentes pro christianis*, ch. 38.
- <sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).